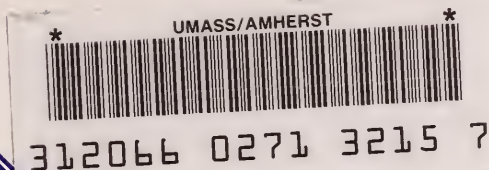


MASS. E121.2: AL51



# ALL ABOUT PACs

**PARENT  
ADVISORY  
COUNCILS  
(PACs)**

**A Manual for Special Education  
Parent Advisory Councils**

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS  
COLLECTION

FEB 08 1988

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# I. Introduction To PACS

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Today parents can influence educational decisions on programming for special needs children even more significantly by DEVELOPING or JOINING local parent advisory councils called PACs. Local parent advisory councils can give parents not only the opportunity to participate in educational programming in a more informed way, they can also provide an important service by developing community support for families of special needs children and support for the special education programs in their school districts.

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## WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

State and federal education laws require parent participation in the development of the Individualized Educational Plan. Also, the law requires parent participation at regional and state levels through membership on Regional Advisory Councils and the State Advisory Commission. Parent Advisory Councils at the local community level are newly mandated by Chapter 766 Regulations.

## WHAT DO LOCAL PACS DO?

Activities vary. Some communities have PACs that have done the following:

- **Somerville** sponsored a series of films and group discussions for parents in that community.
- **Westfield** started a “Living Skills” course for mildly retarded high school students.
- **Medford** prepared a parent resource booklet and established a “parent support line” that includes a tape recorded message about the 766 evaluation process.
- **Chelsea** tours the special education programs in the community annually, and provides assistance to nearby communities in establishing PACs.

## WHAT DO THE STATE AND REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCILS DO?

In addition to the local Parent Advisory Councils, there are state and regional councils. Their roles and responsibilities are as follows:



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- A. **REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCILS (RACs)**—There is a council in each of the six education regions in Massachusetts as mandated by state law and Chapter 766 Regulations, Chapter 6. Each RAC has sixteen members, at least half of whom must be parents of children enrolled in special education programs. The Council advises the Department of Education's regional centers about programs within the region. Responsibilities also include an Annual Report to the State Advisory Commission.
- B. **STATE ADVISORY COMMISSION (SAC)**—Members advise the Department of Education on special education needs in Massachusetts and may review, at the request of the parents, any decisions rendered by hearing officers from the Bureau of Special Education Appeals. The SAC is also responsible for an Annual Report to the Board of Education, which includes a summary of RAC reports, and for making recommendations for addressing any unmet needs in special education.

All advisory councils are formally organized groups generally including parents, professionals and other interested local community representatives committed to obtaining the best possible service/programs for children with special needs.

The council must **ADVOCATE** for children with special needs. It should **ADVISE** special education administrators, school departments, school committees, parents, and the community at large about issues affecting special education programs, and should **SUPPORT** school staff to improve their services.

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## **DO PACS HAVE AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE?**

They do not have formal authority but they have a great deal of influence on school committees and superintendents and special education administrators when their activities are well planned and centered around advocating and advising on special education concerns such as:

- Supporting the special education budget at the school committee meeting;
- Developing and distributing flyers, booklets, and newsletters;
- Sponsoring open houses and promoting information sharing among parents, professionals, and the community at large;
- Addressing groups such as a PTA or other civic groups about special education issues (successes as well as problems);
- Surveying community needs and resources;
- Providing training and support for parents of special needs children;
- Serving as a sounding board for special education concerns;
- Building support for special education programs and services;
- Advising school administrators in the development of the system's Annual Plan for Special Education.

# II. Organizing an Advisory Council

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## A. Recruitment of Members

The strengths of an organization depend on the composition of the group and it should be varied—not just parents of special needs children. A balanced membership is best and will give you many different perspectives as well as support for programs. Suggested models:

### Model I

Parents (should be in the majority)  
Educators  
Human Service Agency Representatives  
Older Citizens  
School Committee Members  
Local Merchants/Businessmen and women

### Model II

30% Special Education Personnel  
30% Non Special Education People, including:  
1 School Committee Member  
1 Vocational Teacher  
1 Regular Education Teacher or Administrator  
40% Parents

Whatever the model, the PAC should work with school administrators as early as possible to gain their support and cooperation.

## B. Recruitment Methods

Parents and schools working together may seek members through local schools by informational flyers sent home with children and announcements on local radio, TV stations, and newspapers. (The Federal Communications Commission requires radio and TV



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stations to provide public service announcements free.) Further outreach may include the distribution of a monthly agenda, and publication of contact persons. To recruit outside members, and early childhood members, informational flyers should be sent to homes through mail. Information should be sent to key school personnel, including teachers. Posters may be placed in community businesses. These activities will require a cooperative and supportive approach between parents and school officials.

An orientation and training session should be given for people who respond to recruiting efforts. It will serve several purposes: to acquaint new members with each other and the goals of the organization; to share experiences and information; and to motivate them to continue to come.

## C. Bylaws

Every group should have basic bylaws, voted on by the members, on how the organization will be run, such as:

Article I.	Name
Article II.	Goals and Objectives
Article III.	Terms of Membership
Article IV.	Officers (titles, duties, terms of office)
Article V.	Election Procedures
Article VI.	Committees
Article VII.	Meetings
Article VIII.	Amendments to bylaws

Sections may be added or amended as the need arises. Some groups like detailed guidelines, others prefer to keep them brief and simple.

# III. Council Activities

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## HOW DO PARENTS BEGIN TO DEVELOP ACTIVITIES?

### Step I. Start with a Needs Assessment

...to provide information on gaps between what is needed and what exists for programs. Be sure that information is collected from many sources.

1. Obtain facts and opinions describing the needs;
2. Find out how the issue developed;
3. Learn who is affected by the issue;
4. Locate the source(s) of the issue.

### Step II. Do it by:

1. Formal assessment—written surveys, telephone and personal interviews, and/or;
2. Informal assessments—brainstorming meetings/discussions

Action plans should be based on your needs assessment facts, not on intuition. Some plans should have long term goals and some should have short term goals. A short term goal, such as providing information on special education resources in the community, usually gives members an incentive to continue to work on long term issues. A long term goal may be to improve cooperation and communication between the special education community and the school district at large.

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### **Step III. Prioritize**

The group should develop criteria to decide on the importance or priority for the action. Useful questions to ask are:

1. What decisions do we want to influence?
2. How urgent is this issue?
3. How do we gather information?
4. Can the PAC really do something about the problem?
5. Are the members interested in working on this issue?
6. Who will present the issue?

### **Step IV. Identify Resources and Constraints**

Also remember to identify possible negative factors that might prevent you from succeeding. Negative factors may include lack of information, lack of interest, or lack of available funds.

### **Step V. Generate Alternative Strategies**

Familiar ways are good but don't always work. Explore new approaches.

### **Step VI. Select the Best Method**

Rank in terms of feasibility and effectiveness. You may need to combine methods or have a back-up plan.

### **Step VII. Implement the Plan**

1. Sequence the activities;
2. Choose the persons responsible for each activity;

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3. Establish a starting date and target a completion date;
  4. Determine the resources needed.

## **Step VIII. Evaluate Progress**

1. Review activities for weaknesses that can be corrected;
2. Once completed, examine activities to determine how successfully goals were met, such as:
  - Were activities realistic and appropriate?
  - Did the PAC accomplish what it set out to do?

## **Step IX. Communication**

Internal policies are necessary to keep the group functioning and growing.

1. Keep the minutes of past meeting and review at the next meeting, and keep a simple correspondence file. All members should have access.
2. Encourage everyone to participate in meetings and activities. (That's a Must!)
3. Create an open climate—make people feel their ideas are welcome.





# IV. Management Of A PAC

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## A. Selecting a Chairperson

Managing a large group requires leadership ability and skills such as:

1. Ability to make everyone in the room feel comfortable and equally important;
2. Ability to motivate members to accomplish goals and objectives;
3. Flexibility to new ideas and suggestions;
4. Ability to delegate responsibilities to the right person;
5. Personal and interpersonal communication skills (written and oral);
6. Negotiation skills;
7. Ability to recognize and regard talent and foster new leadership.

These skills should be kept in mind when selecting a chairperson.

## B. Meetings

Meetings should be scheduled on a regular basis as agreed upon by a majority of members. (Scheduling meetings at schools, public libraries, YMCA's or other public facilities should be done to accommodate the majority.)

One of the chairperson's most important functions is to run effective, focused meetings. Specific suggestions for making meetings successful include the following:

- **Prepare ahead of time.** This means everything from checking on the room, the refreshments and the agenda, to

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pre-thinking the task assignments and anticipating possible conflicts between members.

- **Be ready to help the group break the required work down into manageable tasks.** Try to make certain that each member understands how his or her task fits into the larger picture. Be ready to explain why accomplishing each task will move the group toward its goal. Ask yourself: What is each step in the process? What do we need to accomplish it? How can I help people do it?
- **Make sure the group establishes a realistic schedule.** A schedule that does not allow enough time to accomplish the goals will discourage future activities. It will make the group feel like it has failed. On the other hand, a successful experience will motivate group members to keep on working.
- **Be sensitive to why people are there.** It is important to recognize that people get involved for different reasons. Reasons for participating can vary from a sense of civic responsibility to a chance to socialize, from a way to get attention on a personal problem to a desire to accomplish a specific goal.
- **Realize that individuals play different roles in meetings.** Do not let participants upset you or anger you. It is your job to keep the meeting moving. Also, re-

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member that people can play more than one role at the same meeting. Some common roles include presenting issues, observing, identifying pitfalls, obstructing and mediating.

- **Keep track of the time and keep the meeting focused.** Allow enough time to introduce the agenda, discuss the issues and summarize the results. Try to make sure that members do not monopolize the meeting or repeat points already discussed. You should also be careful to keep to the agenda and prevent members from squabbling among themselves.
- **Encourage everyone to participate.** Try to create an atmosphere of mutual support and trust by reinforcing good suggestions or asking listeners for their opinions. Do not allow one member to monopolize the discussion. Try to build on individual members' ideas.
- **Try to end the meeting in an organized way that sets the stage for the next meeting.** Avoid leaving any loose ends. Make sure to summarize what happened, identify the next steps, go over any task assignments and set a time and place for the next meeting.

Finally, clearly defining your issue—and sticking to it—is critical to your group's success, because educational issues can be very complicated. It is often difficult to separate educational issues

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from political or social issues, but it is important to do so. Your group should focus on its goal and not become overly distracted by secondary issues.

- C. Agendas** should be sent in advance. Ordinarily, the chairperson, with the approval of the special education administrator, prepares the agenda. Members should be asked if they have items to include. The agenda can be used as part of a news release if you wish.
- D. Minutes** are very useful. Distribution of minutes to key school personnel helps publicize the PAC's work. Moreover, a file of minutes forms a history of the group which should be made available to new members. Accurate minutes should be available to absentees.
- E. Subcommittees** should evolve as needed to work on specific activities and report back to the whole council. Usually they are made up of volunteers and one person is asked to chair each subcommittee.
- F. Training Needs** should be assessed periodically and appropriate programs developed. Members of local councils should be informed of activities of STATE and REGIONAL councils. A liaison person should be designated.
- G. External Policies** are needed on how to present your message to the outside world. Publications, media presentations, and training programs are important. Collaborate with the schools, administrators and staff as well as other community groups. Encourage parent calls and ideas.



# V. CONCLUSION

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Parent organization often begins on a small scale. Creating interest, building support, organizing a working group, planning for action and accomplishing a goal take time, concern and steady work. By becoming involved, you can improve your child's learning opportunities. By making the effort to identify issues, research problems and develop solutions, you can organize a group strong enough to influence educational policy decisions. Educational excellence requires your participation. As a parent, your voice needs to be heard.



# For further information

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219 North Street  
North Reading, MA 01864  
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Greater Boston Regional Education Center  
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Southeast Regional Education Center  
Lakeville State Hospital  
Route 105  
Lakeville, MA 02346  
(617) 947-1231 or 727-1440

Central Massachusetts Regional Education Center  
Beaman Street, Route 140  
West Boylston, MA 01583  
(617) 835-6266 or 727-1346

Northwest Regional Education Center  
Church Street  
North Adams, MA 01247  
(413) 664-4511 or (617) 727-8452

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Greater Springfield Regional Education Center  
Macek Drive  
Chicopee, MA 01013  
(413) 594-8511, 8512

## **For further assistance in developing a PAC**

### **FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

312 Stuart Street  
Boston, MA 02116  
(617) 482-2915

P.O. Box 992  
Westfield, MA 01086  
(413) 562-3691



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